

DON THORSEN

*The Wesleyan Impulse in Teaching*

**Abstract**

This professor's pedagogy and theology has long been informed by Wesley, and his essay investigates several themes in Wesley's writings and ministry, including the Wesleyan quadrilateral, experimental religion, catholic spirit, and social holiness. From the perspective of teaching theology, the Wesleyan quadrilateral is very useful because it acknowledges the complexity with which Christians formulate their beliefs, values, and practices. Wesley advocated experimentation with regard to how he developed his Christian beliefs, values, and practices leading this professor to use experimental methods in his pedagogy. The catholic spirit prompts him to present theology in a way that includes the breath of Christianity: Protestant and Catholic, Eastern and Western, liberal and conservative high church and low church, and so on. The theme of social holiness leads him to raise students' consciences about social as well as individual dimensions of biblical teaching.

**KEYWORDS:** catholicity, experimental religion, social holiness, Wesleyan quadrilateral, Wesley

**Don Thorsen** is Professor of Theology and Chair of Advanced Studies in the Haggard Graduate School of Theology at Azusa Pacific University.

What impulses influence my teaching? What drives my passion for it? How do I go about the task of teaching? The answers to these questions, one may easily imagine, are complex. There is no one impulse that motivates my teaching, and there is no one way that I go about doing it. Even so, I can easily attest to how my teaching has been influenced by the beliefs, values, and practices of John Wesley. This influence is explainable, in part, due to the fact that I am a professor of theology, yet my pedagogy as well as my theology has long been informed by Wesley.

Although my teaching has been influenced by a variety of sources, the Wesleyan impulse represents the dominant influence upon my teaching because of its theoretical and practical ability to cope with the complexities of life, especially in an increasingly postmodern world. In talking about Wesley's contributions to teaching, I want to investigate several themes in his writings and ministry. They include the Wesleyan quadrilateral, experimental religion, catholic spirit, and social holiness. This does not include an exhaustive list of the contributions Wesley provides for both education and theology, but it helps to reveal the heart of how I teach.

### **Wesleyan Quadrilateral**

The Wesleyan quadrilateral represents a summary of Wesley's understanding of what is authoritative with regard to establishing Christian beliefs, values, and practices. The quadrilateral has to do with the primary authority of scripture, coupled with the secondary—albeit genuine—authority of tradition, reason, and experience. This fourfold understanding of religious authority was not coined by Wesley. Instead the quadrilateral was formulated by Albert Outler during the 1960s. Outler thought it fairly summarized the complex way Wesley went about investigating the truth of matters. He began with scripture, however, Wesley was open to what could be learned through the historical study of church tradition, critical thinking, and relevant experience, whether it included personal, social, or scientific experience.

Outler used the language of the Wesleyan quadrilateral, not as a geometric figure, but as a reflection of Anglican usage during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which used the figurative language of a secure city protected by four walls. Neither Outler nor Wesley considered scripture to be of equal authority with the others; scripture was thought to be divinely inspired and the primary religious authority. Unfortunately, Outler's imagery was not obvious, and people have

mistakenly interpreted the quadrilateral to signify a relativizing of scriptural authority. Later Outler lamented that he had coined the term, but by then the quadrilateral had become widely used to describe Wesley's understanding of religious authority. In 1990, I wrote a book about *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* in order to affirm the usefulness of the term in talking about Wesley's beliefs, values, and practices, while at the same time affirming his emphasis upon the primacy of scriptural authority.<sup>1</sup>

From the perspective of teaching theology, the Wesleyan quadrilateral is very useful because it acknowledges the complexity with which Christians formulate their beliefs, values, and practices. Wesley affirmed the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* (Latin, 'scripture alone'), however, he understood it to mean the primacy, rather than exclusivity, of scriptural authority. In theory, *sola Scriptura* sounds wonderful, devotionally speaking, but in practice, no one uses scripture exclusively in their theology. Instead, there occurs constant interaction and interdependence between the study of church history and relevant experience, utilizing critical thinking in the investigative process.

The Wesleyan quadrilateral can also be of help to Christians in teaching any subject. Too often Christians feel slavishly constrained by what scripture may or may not permit them to study, teach, and affirm, especially in light of the Protestant Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*. However, the quadrilateral helps Christians realize more easily the complementary, rather than contradictory, relationship between scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Whether Christians teach in the arts, humanities, or sciences, there are things to be learned that are valuable beyond what scripture exclusively may say about people as well as the world in which they live.

### Teaching and Postmodernism

Nowadays people increasingly speak about the postmodern context in which we find ourselves. Postmodernism represents a rejection of characteristics of modernism, or what is also called the Enlightenment. Modernism emphasizes the independence of the individual and confidence in the certain knowledge that can be discovered by means of philosophical and scientific investigation, conducted in an objective manner. The authority of past traditions—either of the church, philosophy, or science—is not needed. Individuals can discover truth for themselves.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, is skeptical that individuals can be either objective or certain in their search for truth. Knowledge seems inextricably bound up with the socio-cultural context in which learning occurs. Thus people need to be open to and tolerant of everyone's story or narrative, since each person's beliefs, values, and practices ought to be considered. Because of the relativity of knowledge, no one may claim to have the truth or meta-narrative that supersedes all others.

It is debatable, of course, whether Christianity and postmodernism, understood intellectually rather than culturally, are compatible. However, the Wesleyan quadrilateral is useful in dialoging with postmodernism, since it already acknowledges some of the complexity of searching for and affirming truth. In particular, the quadrilateral can speak the language of the socio-cultural context in which learning occurs, since it acknowledges the experiential dimension of knowledge.

In many ways, Wesley provides a dynamic, interdependent understanding of authority that holds in tension a variety of concerns often thought to be contradictory. This kind of dichotomous thinking is unhelpful; it creates a simplistic kind of either/or thinking that reduces the complexities of life in ways that are theoretically dissatisfying as well as practically disastrous. William Abraham offers a summarization of Wesley's theology that I have always found to be instructive, including how I go about teaching. Abraham says:

Thus he [Wesley] integrates contrasting emphases that are vital to a healthy and comprehensive vision of the Christian faith.

Consider the following disjunctive pairs: faith, works; personal devotions, sacramental practice; personal piety, social concern; justification, sanctification; evangelism, Christian nurture; Bible, tradition; revelation, reason; commitment, civility; creation, redemption; cell group, institutional church; local scene, world perish.<sup>2</sup>

Wesley creatively helps to hold in tension aspects of life, learning, and religion, which too often seem disjointed. He gives us hope for more complex as well as relevant ways of discovering, integrating, applying, and teaching truth—an understanding of education affirmed by many in academia today. For example, my approach to higher education has been shaped by the Carnegie Foundation's priority upon four types of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching.<sup>3</sup> These emphases in higher education seem to me to be quite compatible with those found in Wesley.

### **Experimental Religion**

Wesley described Christianity as “the true, the scriptural, experimental religion.”<sup>4</sup> The word “experimental” has, at least, two meanings for Wesley. First, Wesley thought that Christianity was more than a matter of right, propositional beliefs or doctrines. It was also an experiential matter of the heart—“heart religion”—since religion includes affective and volitional dimensions.<sup>5</sup> This is why, in part, Wesley took the innovative and rather radical step of including experience as a religious authority. Doing so represents one of the more crucial contributions of Wesley to the historical development of Christian theology.

A second, less obvious, use of the term experimental pertains to the inductive, investigative approach Wesley took in his personal and religious endeavors. Reflective of the scientific revolution in which he found himself during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Wesley advocated experimentation with regard to how he developed his Christian beliefs, values, and practices. As a consequence, Wesley innovatively contributed to Christian ministry as well as theology. For example, he was one of the earliest Protestants to do open-air preaching and evangelism, reflective of the suggestion he received from George Whitefield. Wesley became an itinerant preacher, traveling hundreds of thousands of miles, during his life, ministering throughout Great Britain. He orchestrated a complex network of small groups—Methodist societies, bands, and select bands—which emphasized a high degree of accountability for the sake of spiritual growth and ministry. Wesley developed an extensive organization of lay ministers, who effectively led the Methodist small groups that Wesley promoted. Lay ministers included women, which represented a radical departure from mainstream Christianity by empowering women to lead in church. Subsequently, Methodism grew quickly throughout the American Colonies as well as Great Britain and, eventually, the world.

In my own teaching, I try to be creative in order to enhance learning among my students. I have, from time to time, implemented a number of experimental methods in pedagogy. For example, I have regularly used Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy in conceptualizing, structuring, and teaching courses. I have included service learning components in the teaching of theology so that students are better able to integrate theory (theology) and practice (ministry). I have incorporated collaborative learning techniques, similar to the small group accountability utilized in Wesley's Methodist societies. I have also implemented various technological innovations, despite the fact that I seem to be so challenged in the area of technology. Power point presentations, e-College components in class, and online teaching all represent experiments in my teaching, and I plan to develop them more in the future.

In my writing, I also try to be creative. For example, I recently published an introductory textbook entitled *An Exploration of Christian Theology*.<sup>6</sup> I use an ecumenical approach to the teaching of theology, which is not in itself unique, except for the fact that most ecumenical introductions to theology tend to leave out some of the more evangelically oriented expressions of Christianity. What makes my book unique is the fact that I include a variety of pedagogical devices in order to communicate theology in a way that is winsome and humorous as well as presenting the subject matter in a scholarly way. For example, I drew more than 200 line drawings that I included in the textbook. Although I am not an expert artist, by any stretch of the imagination, my drawings help to provide some amusing as well as poignant drawings, which I think help to emphasize key points that I want to make about theology. In



addition to the drawings, I include original poetry that I wrote, quotes from a diversity of key Christians from the past, and a significant number of charts, graphs, and other visual aids to keep the attention of introductory readers. Although this format may not directly represent the Wesleyan impulse in my teaching, it certainly captures the spirit of Wesleyan experimentation.

### **Catholic Spirit**

Wesley's sermon on a "Catholic Spirit" challenged Christians to be receptive towards others, particularly those who are not like them.<sup>7</sup> Being receptive involves more than an understanding and appreciation for the views of others. It also involves support, more or less, of those who have different beliefs, values, and practices.

Protestants have perennially misunderstood the word 'catholic', since the word has too often been mistakenly identified with the Roman Catholic Church. However, its roots predate the various manifestations of Catholic Churches. Catholicity represents a universal, all-embracing concept, which was used by the ancient church in the Nicene Creed to say that churches know no boundaries. The church is worldwide and open to anyone who wants to join. Wesley upholds the Christian need for catholicity by encouraging openness to fellowshiping with and possibly cooperating in ministry with those from other church traditions, including Roman Catholics. Catholicity also extends to people representative of different genders, races, ethnicities, cultures, linguistic backgrounds, nationalities, and so on.

Catholicity also applies to the way I teach. Without denying my own beliefs, values, and practices, I try to present theology in a way that includes the breath of Christianity: Protestant and Catholic, Eastern and Western, liberal and conservative (though I dislike such categorizations due to the relativity of their meaning), high church and low church, and so on. I also try to give the fairest and most appreciative rationales for their theology. Why? I want students, especially my seminary students, to decide for themselves what they believe, value, and practice. Although I personally affirm a Wesleyan oriented theology, I am more concerned about helping students to decide what they themselves believe. This challenge requires that I present a variety of viewpoints because that encourages students to be more critical thinkers in their theological decision-making. As adult learners, they need to be challenged to question and take ownership of their own determination of theology, lest they rely too much upon the views of others. As clergy and lay leaders in churches, they will especially need to learn greater autonomy and confidence in their abilities to guide people spiritually as well as theologically, administratively, and other ways.

Catholicity is crucial to the way I write. I already mentioned the fact that *An Exploration of Christian Theology* presents an ecumenical approach to the subject

matter. My ecumenicity is not just a marketing ploy or requirement of the publisher. On the contrary, it represents an essential part of my Wesleyan-oriented worldview. In any kind of teaching, I think it is important to present a view that is fair and balanced. Moreover, it is not enough for someone or some institution to declare it to be fair and balanced. Those who make such claims, sadly, can be the most unfair and imbalanced representatives, at least, of Christian beliefs, values, and practices. Claims like that can be made, but there must be substance to them. Wesley advocated on behalf of many different Christian perspectives, for example, as found in the fifty plus volumes of *A Christian Library*. This multivolume anthology that Wesley edited included literally hundreds of Christian authors from different times, places, and theologies that truly reflected a concern for a universal, catholic educational experience.

### **Social Holiness**

In talking about Christian spirituality and growth in holiness, Wesley was convinced that there is “no holiness but social holiness.”<sup>8</sup> People have often misunderstood this statement. In the context of his writing, Wesley emphasized the importance of social dynamics in the promotion of holiness. More specifically, he emphasized the importance of spiritual accountability in the various societies, bands, and select bands that he organized. One of the best ways to grow in Christian faith, hope, and love is in the context of spiritual transparency and answerability, which was encouraged by small group dynamics. He even referred to small groups as one of the prudential means of grace, vis-à-vis, the formally instituted means of grace, such as the sacraments.<sup>9</sup> Although small group dynamics are not explicitly advanced in scripture, Wesley thought that experience gives manifest evidence for the personal and social benefits of spiritual accountability.

The phrase “no holiness but social holiness,” thus, has more to do with small group dynamics than with issues related to social consciousness and activism. Yet, the phrase implies a valuation for the multiple social dimensions of life, Christianity, and how believers are to understand and apply themselves in social as well as individual contexts. It is no accident that Wesley was heavily involved with social activism, particularly on behalf of the poor—“Wesley’s self-chosen constituency: ‘Christ’s poor’”<sup>10</sup> He did not have a privatized view of Christianity. On the contrary, Wesley established and developed a variety of compassion ministries in order to feed, clothe, house, and train those who, for various ways, had become impoverished physically and socially. Indeed, he went far beyond compassion ministries by advocating on behalf of the poor, the dispossessed, the marginalized, and so on. At times, Wesley’s advocacy included changing the structures of society and government that caused people’s impoverishment. For example, his letter to William Wilberforce

reveals his rejection of slavery as an abomination to God and Christianity, and Wesley encouraged Wilberforce to continue his abolitionism.<sup>11</sup>

In my teaching, I try to raise students' consciences about social as well as individual dimensions of biblical teaching with regard to what it means to be Christian, to love one's neighbor as oneself, to care for the creation with which God entrusted people, and—in other words—to be holy. The Wesleyan impulse includes care for and advocacy on behalf of those who, for one reason or another, have become neglected, marginalized, dispossessed, oppressed, and persecuted. Wesley considered matters of justice to be as important to God as matters of faith, hope, and love. Loving others, in fact, included practical applications of one's theology for the physical as well as spiritual well being of others. This social concern and activism occurred in Wesley's ministry and writings; it also occurred in the Holiness Movement, for example, as found in the abolitionism of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the free pews of the Free Methodist Church, and the innovative care for the poor by the Salvation Army. Regrettably, the social concern and activism of the Holiness Movement waned during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, considering such ministries dispensable. How tragic! United Methodism took on the mantle of social activism, but such ministries ought not to be neglected, given the emphasis Jesus placed upon it in both his words and actions. Wesley too modeled as well as preached the need for a holistic approach to Christian beliefs, values, and practices.

Sometimes Wesleyan scholars speak of the holistic nature of Wesley's theology by use of the terms *orthodoxy*, *orthopraxy*, and *orthokardia*—right belief, right actions, and right heart.<sup>12</sup> Certainly Wesley was concerned that his theology be aligned with scripture and historic Christianity. Likewise, he was concerned that Christian practice be inextricably bound up with what one believed and valued; that is the nature of praxis, namely, that theory and practice actively inform and reinforce one another. Yet, Wesley was still concerned about a right heart, or right affections (*orthopathia*). Regardless of the terminology one uses, there needs to be a holistic concern for all aspects of Christianity; there also needs to be a holistic concern for education. Since the Enlightenment, there has been emphasis upon a model of pedagogy known as *Wissenschaft*, sometimes called critical pedagogy, which views education as being objective, detached, analytical, and sometimes narrowly disciplinary.<sup>13</sup> Prior to the Enlightenment, education was often thought of more in terms of a *paideia* model, which emphasized the development of personal character as well as academic rigor. From a Wesleyan perspective, education needs to include not only academic rigor and the development of personal character, it also needs to include practical applications that care for matters of justice and injustice in society, indeed, throughout the entire world.



## Conclusion

The Wesleyan impulse in education includes more than the themes I discussed. However, they represent a helpful starting point for developing a holistic, dynamic, and relevant approach to teaching. Wesley alone is certainly inadequate for developing a philosophy or even a theology of education. He would say the same, since his theology by definition encourages investigation into other people, ideas, and resources.

Overall, I have found Wesley's insights to be very useful in how I have gone about teaching, writing, and promoting Christian higher education in both university and seminary contexts. I commend a Wesleyan impulse for those who want to advance their pedagogy for any type of teaching, whether it be in Christian or secular education, or whether it be in local churches. Wesley offers helpful insights for anyone wanting to incorporate the complex matters of theory and practice, including theology and ministry, into their teaching.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Don Thorsen. *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990; reprint, Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> William J. Abraham. *The Coming Great Revival: Recovering the Full Evangelical Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 67

<sup>3</sup> Ernst L. Boyer. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate, A Special Report* (Princeton: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, Preface, §6, "Sermons on Several Occasions," *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial ed.), vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 1:106.

<sup>5</sup> Wesley, Preface, §6, "Sermons on Several Occasions," *Works*, 1:106.

<sup>6</sup> Don Thorsen, *An Exploration of Christian Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit" (sermon 39) *Works* (Bicentennial ed.), 2:79-96.

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, Preface, §5, "Hymns & Sacred Poems," *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958; reprint, London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 14: 321.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the educational implications of Wesley's prudential means of grace, see Dean G. Blevins, "Renovating Christian Education in the 21st Century: A Wesleyan Contribution," *Christian Education Journal: Series 3*, 2, no. 1 (2005): 6-29, esp. 14. Cf. John Wesley, "The Means of Grace" (sermon 16), *Works* (Bicentennial ed.), 1:376-397

<sup>10</sup> Albert Outler's description of Wesley's preferential care for the poor; see Albert Outler, introductory comment, "The Use of Money" (sermon 50),

Works (Bicentennial ed.), 2:263.

<sup>11</sup> John Wesley, “Letter to a Friend [William Wilberforce],” Wesley’s Works, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978; reprint, London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 13:153.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of these categories, see Gregory S. Clapper, “‘True Religion’ and the Affections: A Study of John Wesley’s Abridgement of Jonathan Edwards’ Treatise on Religious Affections,” Wesleyan Theological Journal 19, no. 2 (1984): 77-89.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of paideia and critical pedagogy, see Edward Kuhlman, “Emancipative Education and Predatory Culture: Intersections Between Christian Paideia and Critical Pedagogy,” Christian Scholar’s Review, 29, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 515-530.

THOMAS AQUINAS Disputation as a Teaching Method	
The Steps of Disputatio	The Spirit of Disputatio
The Question	Listening to the Interlocutor
Opponents’ Answers	Respecting Both Argument/Person
Agreements	Addressing Oneself to Him/Her
Disagreements	Refraining from Arbitrary Jargon
Answer	Seeking Clarity, not Sensationalism
— Josef Pieper, <i>Guide to Thomas Aquinas</i> New York: Random House, 1962, 72-82	